

Newspoll vs Facebook - The Effect of Social Media on Opinion Polling

Simon King

I was recently leafing through the latest copy of Monthly Magazine and I came across an advert for the Adelaide Festival of Ideas, more specifically for a debate to be held at the Adelaide Town Hall with the question ‘The Internet is Evil Discuss’. This indirectly got me thinking about two recent conversations with colleagues and friends about the federal election and the general state of politics. The first was about the relative merits of the ABC election tool ‘Vote Compass’. We talked about the way that the site allowed someone, upon answering a series of questions on subjects such as taxation, asylum seekers, climate change and education to name a few, to determine their political orientation. I agreed that it was useful and he suggested I should write a piece about this.

The second conversation came from my friends on Facebook. Looking at my page and the amount of discussion on the relative merits of Kevin Rudd – Labor but generally acceptable and Tony Abbott – untrustworthy and ready to take Australia back to the 1950s. I quickly realised the amount of conversation, argument and reposting of election commentary and editorials that was taking place. It got me thinking about the role that social media plays in modern politics, but more importantly, given that my doctoral thesis is about public opinion and opinion polling in Australia, how the proliferation of social media and alternate forms of information transfer have impacted upon pollsters and their work.

Originally polling was based on face to face interviews, where interviewers would be given an area and a pre-determined cross section of households to door knock. With the near universal era of telephone access pollsters changed their tack, organizing their surveys around completely random samples of respondents. These

two survey methods produced results that for the last 30+ years have been remarkably consistent and accurate. The traditional forum for these results was the daily broadsheet. This led to a partnership between polling organisations and the newspapers. This in turn has led to what respected political commentator George Megalogenis has described as lazy journalism requiring little or no effort beyond reading a poll result.

This seemingly monopolistic and cosy relationship has been impacted by two things; first the changes in communication technologies. Mobile phone and internet usage including such programs as Skype have rendered home phone ownership and practices increasingly redundant. A 2011 report released by the Australian Communications and Media Authority found that during 2009-2010 the number of Australians aged 14 and over without a landline telephone in their home increased by 35%, from 1.7 million to 2.3 million.¹ This figure has risen consistently over the last five years, particularly among 18 – 34 year olds.² Alongside this trend, mobile phone use has dramatically increased – 14% of Australians are mobile-only users.³ The affect this has had on the way that traditional polling has been done is only now being realized. In essence the problem that emerges is that pollsters only contact those households with landlines. This means that those in the 18-34 year old age bracket if the trend continues will increasingly be absent or underrepresented in polling results. A quick survey of the top four pollsters Newspoll, Galaxy, Morgan and Essential reveals that none of them poll those with mobile phones. If the current trend of declining fixed landline ownership increases this means that traditional ways of gauging public opinion have the potential to be unrepresentative and unreliable.

The second concomitant issue along with increasing mobile phone usage is one of information sources. Newspapers and

¹ ACMA, *2009-2010 Communications report*, pg 14.

² ACMA, *2009-10 Communications report series: Report 2 – Take-up and use of voice services by Australia consumers*, pg 4, 22.

³ Ibid, pg 22.

television used to be the predominant resource for public education about election campaigns and the political process. Political parties utilised these and continue to rely on them as the main communication method. Since the year 2000, with increased access to the internet and the development of alternate sources of information, this relationship has changed. The foundation of websites such as Facebook and the emergence of a more computer literate segment of society has meant that alternate arenas of information have emerged. This is increasingly circumventing the mainstream media. Sites such as Crikey and advocacy group Get-up are not only offering alternates to the newspaper, but are also offering new forums for expressing political ideas.

The major political parties have quickly wired into this changed landscape establishing Facebook pages and using YouTube to release policy announcements in real time, and the news media have rapidly transformed their mode of operation, adapting to the information age with online newspapers etc. This is to be applauded, as is any attempt to broaden political debate.

The problem is that opinion pollsters are a part of this political debate. Despite some obvious shortcomings and criticisms including the fact that polls can influence voting, the bandwagon effect, and that rather than reflect debate polls can be the driving force in promoting issues, polls can help to clarify attitudes to particular issues and in the context of elections they can be a useful predictive device.

With the changed reality of a society where social media dominates, polling organisations risk the danger of becoming unrepresentative or worse irrelevant.

About the Author

Simon King is a PHD candidate in the School of International Studies, Discipline of History, at Flinders University. His thesis examines the emergence of opinion polling in Australia, especially the influence of politics during World War Two.